

Musical Abilities

I have had the opportunity to teach many special needs students over the years. From them, I have learned how to adapt traditional approaches to teaching an instrument so that these students can develop their musical abilities.

Research shows that learning to play an instrument helps students with a range of conditions including ADD, ADHD, Autism, Asperger Syndrome and Down Syndrome by encouraging the development of coordination, self-esteem, patience, perseverance and problem-solving skills.

Through my experiences, I have learned that teaching special needs students requires me to adapt my expectations regarding a student's rate of progress and my approach to teaching specific skills. Repetition, for example, is a key component of any student's practice routine, but for students with special needs, repetition is crucial.

One of my piano students had physical and learning disabilities. Each week, we would review the same basic lesson material that involved learning to play songs consisting of two or three notes for each hand. Initially, our lessons were a real challenge for her and me.

Once I adapted my expectations and gained a better understanding of her specific needs, our lessons became much more productive. I realized that small accomplishments were huge for her. She was thrilled when she played those two- and three-note songs using a different finger for each key.

I have taught several drum students with a range of disabilities for whom music reading was extremely difficult. They did, however, have excellent musical memories. These students could successfully play along with a recording of a song after only one or two attempts. They each did so by creating their own drum part that was appropriate for the song and by learning the form of the song by ear.

If you provide a learning environment in which special needs students feel they can relax, have fun and develop at their own pace, their musical abilities will shine through. Your students will benefit in many ways through their musical accomplishments and you will have a truly rewarding teaching experience.

Submitted by Ed Lettner

Ed Lettner owns The Music Studio in Etobicoke, which has offered music instruction since 1990. He is an honours graduate of the Humber College Institute of Technology music program. The Music Studio has a new and innovative music therapy program called Connecting Through Music. For information about this and other programs at The Music Studio, please call 416-234-9268, email ed@themusicstudio.ca or visit themusicstudio.ca

